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PUBLIC COMMENTS FOR
THE MARYLAND PUBLIC COMMISSION
ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT
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Submitted by
John R. Schol, Bishop

As bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, I represent the almost 200,000 United Methodists in this region. Today, we grieve with the hundreds of families and friends who lost loved ones due to murder. Their loss is all of our loss. Their pain is all of our pain. Their need for healing is all of our need for healing. Today I speak against violence and the causes of violence within our society and pledge to continue to work with people across the State of Maryland to bring an end to violence. The most Godly and healing act we can do for those who have lost their lives senselessly is to work to prevent future murders.

As a denomination, with more than 11 million members, United Methodists speak with one voice through our Book of Discipline and Social Principles. In our church law, United Methodists emphatically declare that "We oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes." (Book of Discipline, Para. 164A)

We are against the death penalty for a number of reasons. Theologically, we recognize that, despite the common assumption to the contrary, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" does not justify imposing the penalty of death. Jesus explicitly repudiated this type of retaliation in Matthew 5:38-39. Further, Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans writes (Romans 12:19-21),

"Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (NRSV).

Capital punishment denies God's power and ultimate authority to exact justice and also to transform and restore humanity. Such state-sponsored killing is wrong. It violates our Christian faith and the basic, life-affirming values of a civilized society. We oppose capital punishment because we believe in the sanctity of human life, which only God can give and only God should take away.

The United Methodist Church cannot accept retribution or social vengeance as a reason for taking a life. It violates our deepest belief in God as the creator and redeemer of humankind. We reject any assertion that human life can be taken humanely by the state. Indeed, in the long run, the use of the death penalty by the state will increase the acceptance of revenge in our society and will give official sanction to a climate of violence.

As a matter of sound government, we would hope our leaders would listen to the studies they themselves have commissioned, which fail to support the thesis that capital punishment deters homicide more effectively than imprisonment.

In addition, we ask that you take into account that the state has been wrong in this arena, which is untenable. We know today that people like Kirk Bloodsworth, who was convicted twice for a crime we now know he didn't commit and Anthony Gray, who when threatened with the death penalty, falsely confessed to a rape and murder to which he had no part, might have been executed under current law but fortunately were released when further evidence exonerated them. While both of these men were fortunate to be released, history has shown others were not as fortunate and were executed for crimes they did not commit.

The costs that the death penalty imposes upon the citizens of Maryland are also unacceptable. A report by the New Urban Institute found that Maryland has spent at least \$186 million on the death penalty since 1978 – this figure is *over and above* what it would have spent had life without parole been the maximum sentence. Additionally, the cost of a single death sentence in Maryland is approximately three times higher – or \$1.9 million more -- than the cost of a comparable non-death penalty case, even taking into account the costs of long-term incarceration.

It calls us to ask if these funds could have been better used to prevent future murders. Our state's precious resources of both time and money could be much better spent on rehabilitation, improved law enforcement, and devising a process to restore both victims and perpetrators to justice and wholeness in more effective, meaningful and humane ways.

As a matter of justice, United Methodists recognize that the death penalty falls unfairly and unequally upon marginalized people including the poor, uneducated, ethnic and religious minorities, and people with mental and emotional illnesses. In the United States, people who receive the death penalty are usually convicted of killing middle or upper class white people, are almost always poor and unable to afford a lawyer, and often suffer from mental or emotional disabilities. As you are aware, a well-known 2003 University of Maryland study concluded that a death sentence in our state is much more likely when the defendant is black and the victim is white. Such an arbitrary application of justice is intolerable.

We believe that our nation's leaders should give attention to the improvement of the total criminal justice system and to the elimination of social conditions that breed crime and cause disorder, rather than foster a false confidence in the effectiveness of the death penalty.

Capital punishment should not be an option in Maryland. Faith values teach us that this type of vengeance or righting injustice is counter to the movement of God. The majority of Maryland voters have repeatedly expressed the sentiment that a sentence of life without parole is an acceptable substitute for the death penalty. It is more humane, more sensible, and more cost effective. We must listen and reject the fallacy that "an eye for an eye" is justice. The death penalty does not serve the values of Maryland and its residents. Today, United Methodists are concerned for the victims of murder and continue to pray and commit to support the families and communities that have been unfairly harmed. We also stand in opposition to the death penalty as a means to right wrongs, deter crime and seek a just resolution to the challenges of murder and violence in our State.

Notes

Kirk Bloodsworth was incarcerated for nine years, twice convicted of brutally raping and killing a 9-year-old girl outside Baltimore in 1984. He spent one year awaiting trial, two years on death row and six years serving a life sentence. In 1992, Bloodsworth, 39, won his freedom after taking a DNA test. The state of Maryland set him free and paid him \$300,000 for wrongful imprisonment.

Anthony Gray, 31, spent seven years in prison for a rape and murder he didn't commit. "It's been a living hell," he said after his release. Gray had pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and first-degree rape in the killing of Linda Mae Pellicano, 38, and was sentenced in 1991 to two concurrent life sentences. But Gray's present attorney said Gray has a below-average IQ and was pressured into the confession, believing he would avoid the death penalty if he entered a guilty plea.